

IMAGES
of America

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN LOS ANGELES



Karin L. Stanford, Ph.D.
and the Institute for Arts and Media,
California State University, Northridge



Tom Bradley is pictured here during his historical campaign for mayor of Los Angeles in 1973. As the son of a sharecropper, Bradley moved from Texas to Los Angeles with his family at age seven. In 1940, he began a 22-year tenure with the city's police department. While serving as a police officer, he earned a law degree from the Southwestern University School of Law. In 1963, Bradley became the city's first African American council member, and in 1973, he defeated Mayor Sam Yorty to become the second African American mayor of a major U.S. city (after Carl Stokes was elected mayor of Cleveland in 1967). Bradley served five terms as the city's mayor. He is most noted for transforming Los Angeles into an international business and trading center and for hosting the Olympic Summer Games in 1984. (Courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Guy Crowder Collection, CSUN.)



J. Morris Anderson created and first produced the Miss Black America Pageant (MBAP) on August 17, 1968. It was originally a local Philadelphia area pageant, but as a result of support from the NAACP and its protest of the Miss America pageant, the local black pageant received nationwide press coverage. NAACP leaders had long condemned the Miss America pageant for its exclusion of black women. In 1974, Von Gretchen Shepard (above and right) from Los Angeles was crowned Miss Black America. Throughout the years, Miss Black America contestants became staples in black history and culture, including Oprah Winfrey, who competed in 1971 as Miss Black Tennessee. In honor of the pageant, Curtis Mayfield wrote a song titled "Miss Black America." The Miss Black America Pageant lives on and continues to combat negative stereotypes and images of black women. (Both, courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Guy Crowder Collection, CSUN.)





This photograph features several African American cooks and waiters standing in the dining car of a train. Also in the kitchen area, counters and seats were provided for passengers to relax and eat while traveling to their destinations. The waiters are dressed in formal service attire. The fourth waiter from right is Lemaud James Nash Sr. (Courtesy of Launa Jean Nash.)



Charles McKinney (left) and Frank Carter were waiters on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Railroad workers were very important to the black community. They brought income and news about important events affecting African Americans nationwide. This photograph was taken at Union Station around 1945. (Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library.)



These railroad porters were employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad. Also called redcaps, they assisted passengers and handled baggage. African American porters played an important role in recruiting African Americans to Los Angeles. They spread the word about the benefits of Southern California. Porters also distributed African American newspapers along their routes. If these men were employed in 1925 or later, they likely joined the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded by A. Philip Randolph to fight discrimination against African American workers. This image was taken in the 1920s at Central Station in downtown Los Angeles. Central Station was abandoned in 1939 when Union Station opened. (Courtesy of Southern California Library.)



When George W. Bright was hired as a firefighter on October 2, 1897, the fire department had been officially segregated for only two years. The rules prohibited African Americans from eating or fraternizing with other firefighters and using station dishware. One rule required that African American firefighters stand "four human spaces away from the other firemen during line ups and inspections." As a result of the antidiscrimination efforts of African American firefighters, Mayor C. Norris Paulson ordered the fire chief to integrate its ranks in 1955. This photograph was taken in 1910. (Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.)

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The notion of Los Angeles as a wonderful place of opportunity contributed to the western migration of thousands of Americans, including African Americans escaping racism and violence in the South. But Los Angeles blacks encountered a white backlash, and the doors of opportunity were closed in the form of housing covenants, job discrimination, and school segregation. African Americans fought for equality, building strength in community and collective identity that became their ongoing Los Angeles legacy. This story, encapsulated here in vintage photographs, encompasses the settlers of African descent, antislavery and antidiscrimination efforts, and their cultural contributions on Central Avenue and in Hollywood. Also shown are important flash points, including the 1965 Watts uprising and the O. J. Simpson murder trial. The story of African Americans in Los Angeles is one of promise, dreams, and opportunity realized through survival, willfulness, and foresight.

A native of Los Angeles whose family migrated to California from the South in 1944, author Karin L. Stanford, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political science in the Pan African Studies department at California State University, Northridge. She culled this collection of historical images from public and private sources, including those from the Institute for Arts and Media, California State University, Northridge.

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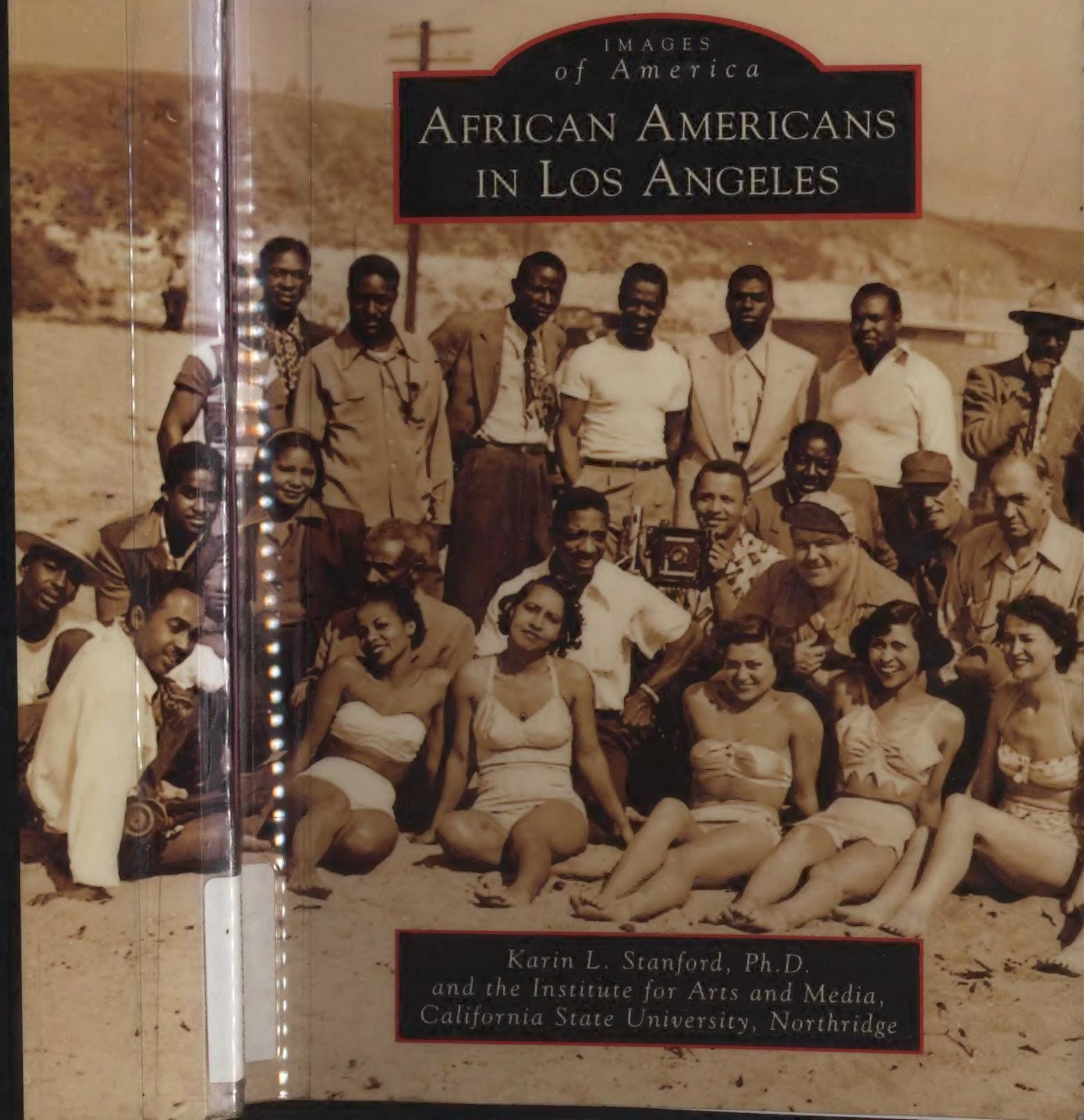
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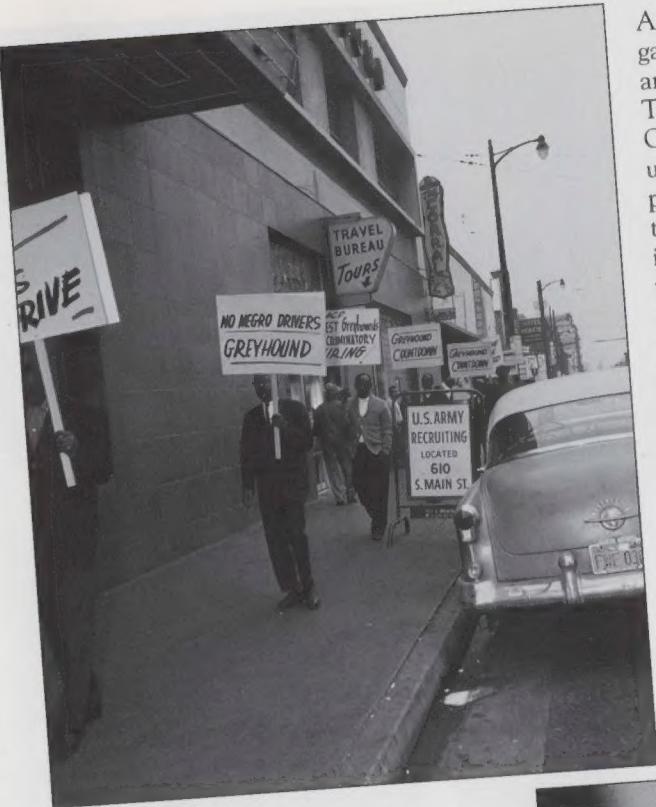
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African American activism to gain opportunities for good jobs and decent wages was ongoing. The pickets against Greyhound in October 1961 were indicative of unequal status in job opportunities, promotions, and training in transportation as well as in other industries. Here blacks demanded that Greyhound hire drivers from their community. (Courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Harry Adams Collection, CSUN.)



Activism targeting equal employment opportunities began to pay off. African Americans were hired to work as drivers on metropolitan and Greyhound buses, which crossed city and state lines.
(Courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Harry Adams Collection, CSUN.)



A smiling teacher with happy children at a dance studio illustrates important aspects of African American life—improvisation and performance. In this June 1961 photograph, the teacher emphasizes performance dance. (Courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Harry Adams Collection, CSUN.)



Several African Americans meet with Mayor Samuel W. Yorty in front of his campaign headquarters on March 18, 1961. Yorty served as mayor of Los Angeles from 1961 to 1973. Disaffection with high unemployment and law enforcement under his watch contributed to the Watts Rebellion of August 1965—and eventually the election of Tom Bradley, an African American, as Yorty's successor. (Courtesy of the Institute for Arts and Media, Harry Adams Collection, CSUN.)